



REDISCIPLING

FROM CHEAP DIVERSITY
TO TRUE SOLIDARITY

THE



WHITE

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FOREWORD BY BRENDA SALTER McNEIL

CHURCH



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CHAPTER ONE

DISCIPLLED BY RACE



A FEW YEARS AGO I was quietly reading in the living room of our first-floor Chicago apartment. Earlier that day I'd patched a hole in the sidewalk in front of our building and then placed a barricade of yellow tape across it to protect the wet cement. It was a pleasant autumn afternoon, and I'd opened the window, so when someone began loudly tearing down the tape, I could hear it clearly.

In the three seconds it took to run from the couch to the window, an image of the person destroying my work jumped into my mind: a student from the local public high school. If I'm completely honest here, the person who appeared in my imagination was a young black man. Instead, when I reached the window, I saw someone else, a young white guy, likely a student at the prestigious university in our neighborhood. A sense of frustrated entitlement exuded from his stomping, ripping, and angry cursing. You might think that I yelled at him to stop, but instead I was caught short by what had just taken place—not on the sidewalk but in my own imagination. I walked back to the couch feeling ashamed. For no rational reason I had made an assumption about who was ruining my hard work. Even more troubling, if my own two eyes hadn't seen otherwise, I'd still be assigning blame to an innocent black man—a figment of my imagination—to this day.

Social scientists describe moments like these as evidence of unconscious bias—assumptions existing beyond our awareness that we hold

about groups of people. There are online tests that show the implicit bias most Americans have (for example, against African Americans), but on that autumn afternoon I didn't need an online test to prove my prejudice.¹ I had just failed my own, real-life version of an implicit bias test.

I'm not alone in my failure. By almost every measure, American society demonstrates racial biases that center certain people within it—white men like myself, for example—while marginalizing others. Everything from access to credit, accumulating generational wealth, engaging with law enforcement, treatment by health care professionals, and even the likelihood of a mother's death while giving birth are affected by our collective racial biases against people of color, and especially African Americans and Native Americans.²

We don't leave these biases behind at the entrances of our churches. White Christianity is deeply susceptible to and complicit in the racial biases that inflict damage on people of color. As my own story shows, it's not that most of us are consciously choosing these racial biases; they've simply attached themselves to our imaginations and assumptions. It's our task in this chapter to understand how this happens.

To do this we will examine the racial segregation within white Christianity through the lens of discipleship. There are two important reasons to do this. First, discipleship is central to Christianity. As philosopher Dallas Willard put it, "The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ."³ Any discussion about a change in a Christian's beliefs or behaviors—including those related to racial justice and reconciliation—must begin with our discipleship to Jesus.

The second, perhaps less obvious, reason that discipleship is critical for addressing racial injustice and segregation is that discipleship is not limited to Christianity. There is another kind of discipleship at work on us, and it has been mostly invisible to white Christians. If white Christians are ever to move past the cultural lines of segregation, we'll need to understand this other discipleship. Only then can we reimagine Christian practices that will form us away from the destructive segregation of our culture and into solidarity with the racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse body of Christ.

So let's take a look at these two discipleships: Christian discipleship that nurtures solidarity across cultural lines of division and the racial discipleship that builds walls of segregation and fosters racial injustice.



The word *disciple* occurs close to three hundred times in the New Testament. Yet despite how often it's used, discipleship can be a fuzzy concept. Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples in some of his final instructions before his ascension (Matthew 28:16-20), so we know it's a priority. But as Christians, inheritors of Jesus' command to make disciples, what do we actually mean by discipleship? Because we will rely so thoroughly on discipleship both to understand what is wrong within white Christianity as well as to imagine a hopeful way forward, it's important to be precise. To do this there are two important questions to answer: What is a disciple? and, How are disciples made? Let's begin with the first.

In his classic book about discipleship and the kingdom of God, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard claims that a disciple is, most basically, an apprentice "who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is."⁴ This will become clearer when we turn to racial discipleship, but it's important to notice that there is nothing uniquely Christian about discipleship. Basically, we're thinking about the relationship between a student and her teacher in which the student follows the teacher to become like her teacher in order to do what the teacher does.

The teacher-disciple relationship is different than the education many of us have received. The educational goal for most of us was the transfer of knowledge from one person to another. But the teacher-disciple relationship is just that: a relationship, through which the student takes on the character of the teacher in order to enact the teacher's authority.

While this "follow-become-do" relationship between a teacher and disciple is not inherently Christian, it's easy to see how it became the defining relationship between Jesus and his followers. Remember, for

example, how Jesus called his first disciples to *follow* him, as with Peter and his brother James as they were fishing (Mark 1:17). Or think about Jesus' assumption in Luke 6:40 that disciples *become* like their teachers: "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher." It's an expectation that Paul makes explicit in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Finally, Jesus expects that his disciples will *do* what they have seen him do. When Jesus appointed his twelve apostles in Mark 3:14-15, he did so that "they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons." Just three chapters later, Jesus kept his word, sending the disciples with his authority to do what they had seen him do. So Christian discipleship is not simply obeying what Jesus said; it's also learning to do what he did.

While there is more that could be said about what a disciple is, for our purposes a Christian disciple follows Jesus to become like him and to do what he does.



We can now turn to our second question: How are disciples made?

When thinking about making disciples, we often begin with what Christians believe and then consider how those beliefs are lived out. American ministry often displays the conviction that the process of discipleship is believing new things about God and then acting on those beliefs. So, for example, Jesus taught that the most important commandments are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. We think that knowing this—*really* believing it—is what is necessary for Christians to follow Jesus' example, to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

But this understanding of discipleship—in which correct thinking or believing leads to Christlike actions—significantly misunderstands the basic nature of our humanity. It assumes that we move through the world directed mostly by our minds, as rational beings who think our way toward the good and away from what is sinful. But as Saint Augustine

knew, humans are not mostly thinking or believing beings: we are creatures of desire whose loves orient us through the world. In *Confessions*, this fifth-century North African bishop cautioned against the many things we find alluring in this world: “For they go their way and are no more; and they rend the soul with desire that can destroy it, for it longs to be one with the things it loves and to repose in them. But in them is no place to repose, because they do not abide.”⁵ As Augustine writes earlier, it isn’t that the ends to which our desires orient us are not “things of beauty.” Rather, he’s pointing out that as desiring beings it is our nature to find ultimate meaning in what we most love, famously expressing at the beginning of his *Confessions*, “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”⁶

A discussion of this ancient bishop’s anthropology may seem a long way from our immediate concern about racial justice and reconciliation within white Christianity. But because our lens is discipleship, it’s essential that we consider how people are formed in real life. Jesus did not come to present us with a new set of doctrines or to correct some faulty thinking. As important as right belief is—and it is!—Jesus made it plain that he came to transform us at the deepest possible level, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). Addressing what is wrong within white Christianity must begin with our desires and loves.

Think back to our definition of a Christian disciple: following Jesus to become like Jesus, in order to do what Jesus does. It is in the *becoming* that Augustine’s insights prove so important. Grasping that we are desiring beings allows us to see how we become more like Jesus. So, how are our desires shaped to reflect those of our Savior?



Building on Augustine’s understanding of people as desiring creatures, philosopher James K. A. Smith writes that it’s our *habits* that “incline us to act in certain ways without having to kick into a mode of reflection.”⁷ Remember my implicit bias at the beginning of the chapter? Because we are not first and foremost thinking beings who rationally engage with every encounter, it is our habits which shape our imaginations or, in Augustine’s vocabulary, our loves. My unconscious

assumption about who wrecked my cement was inculcated in me through a set of racially oriented habits.

We aren't usually aware of our habits. In fact, we mostly don't have the time or capacity to think about how they constantly direct our desires. Smith gives the example of a commuter whose daily habits allow her to make the drive without consciously thinking through each step of navigation required to get her car from home to work and then back again. More than once, walking from my car into our apartment, I've realized that I can't remember the drive home. It's a scary thought, but this is how our habits are supposed to work. (If you're ever riding with me, I promise I'll think about driving safely!)

A more difficult example of how habits direct our desires and assumptions is the implicit bias that surfaced when my wet cement got wrecked. In the split second between hearing the wreckage and forming the assumption, I didn't have time to rationally think things through. Rather, a set of racially oriented habits had already been at work deep within me to shape how I imagined the world, including what kind of person would intentionally step into my cement.



Understanding people as desiring beings whose assumptions are aimed by unconscious habits gets us closer to understanding how disciples are made and why discipleship is the way to address racial segregation within white Christianity. But there are a couple more aspects of our humanity that we need to include. It's one thing to say that our desires are directed by our habits, but how are these habits formed? Again, we are considering the *becoming* aspect of our definition of a Christian disciple. As flesh-and-blood creatures who move through the world guided by our desires, what forms the habits that in turn orient our desires?

Here again, Smith is helpful. It is communal *practices* that shape our habits, "routines and rituals that inscribe particular ongoing habits into our character, such that they become second nature to us."⁸ Whether or not we intentionally choose to engage in a particular practice, the results are the same. Over time these practices form habits that then aim our

desires. Practices, writes Smith, are never neutral. So we must ask, “Just what kind of person is this habit or practice trying to produce, and to what end is such a practice aimed?”⁹ In other words, if we want to understand why I, as a desiring being, leapt to certain assumptions about the person who destroyed my wet cement, we need to trace those assumptions through my habits and to the biased practices that shaped them.

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus began his ministry with a simple proclamation: “The kingdom of God/heaven has come near” (Mark 1:15 and Matthew 3:2). The rest of the gospel accounts can be read as Jesus’ mission to announce this kingdom and to demonstrate its power. His atoning and victorious death and resurrection inaugurated this kingdom into which we invite new disciples to this very day. Congruent with our view of people as desiring beings, Jesus does not announce this kingdom through a new list of doctrines, though he does plenty of teaching. Rather, his disciples are exposed to mystifying parables, displays of power, and, most importantly, the person of Jesus himself in all sorts of circumstances: weddings, funerals, storms, long journeys, and uncomfortable cross-cultural encounters.

Yet despite Jesus’ intentionality with his disciples, the kingdom of God eluded their imaginations. For example, Jesus tells his followers that the last will be first in the kingdom, but the disciples keep arguing about who among them is the greatest. Another time the disciples worry about forgetting the bread for one of their road trips right after Jesus had miraculously fed thousands! Their most consistent misunderstanding came whenever Jesus explained that the kingdom of God would come through his death. This vision of God’s will was so beyond the disciples’ imaginations that they simply couldn’t reconcile it with their views of the world.

Of course, the kingdom of God has often eluded our own imaginations. A Native American friend told me that even the word *kingdom* carries too much terrible history for her. As a Christian she realizes the significance of this biblical word, yet the way it is so deeply connected with the European colonialization that resulted in the genocide of her ancestors has proven a significant challenge, and she continues to wrestle with it. The ways we have forced God’s righteous and peaceful

rule into our violent and exploitative agendas shows how often our own imaginations have failed us.

In announcing the kingdom of God, Jesus was inviting his disciples into what philosopher Charles Taylor calls a new “social imaginary.” Rather than thinking about a worldview shaped by Christian beliefs, understanding people as desiring beings is better served by highlighting the importance of our imaginations. A social imaginary is “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, satires, legends, etc.”¹⁰ The way you and I experience the world, and what we expect from it, largely results from how we *imagine* the world. For the disciples this meant navigating through the world as occupied Jewish people who longed for God’s messiah to rescue them from their Roman oppressors. No wonder the kingdom of God was so hard for them to grasp. It was, to a large extent, beyond their capacity to imagine!

Our desires are not static. They point to our ultimate love. As Christians who worship King Jesus, our desires are meant to orient us toward his kingdom. Yet like Jesus’ first disciples, the way we imagine the world at the deepest level of our being is often at odds with the kingdom Jesus announced and inaugurated. So any vision for making Christian disciples must account for the kingdom of God as well as those competing kingdoms that disorder and disorient our desires. Otherwise, like Jesus’ first disciples, we’ll be confused or we’ll even reject the very kingdom Jesus came to announce. And as we’ll see, racial discipleship is sustained by a social imaginary directly opposed to the kingdom of God.

To our initial definition of Christian discipleship as following Jesus to become like Jesus in order to do what Jesus does, we have now added the elements of humans as desiring beings (whose desires are aimed by habit-shaping practices) who move imaginatively through the world. Making disciples, then, is about inviting people into intentional communal practices that both reflect and announce the kingdom of God. These habit-shaping practices orient our desires and, thus, our actions toward the kingdom and its King. This view of disciple-making resonates with St. Augustine’s stirring conviction: “The whole life of a good Christian is an holy desire.”¹¹

Christian disciples are made, then, as they *follow Jesus (into the kingdom of God) to become like Jesus (through habit-shaping practices that orient their desires) in order to do what Jesus does*. In the second part of the book, we'll focus on the second set of parentheses, to reimagine Christian practices that disciple white Christians away from segregation and into solidarity with the body of Christ. But for now, with this definition in mind, we face a difficult question related to the first set of parentheses: Is white Christianity making disciples whose desires are oriented toward the kingdom of God?



While the Bible doesn't address race or racial segregation, it does have plenty to say about the gospel's impact on the sorts of cultural and ethnic divisions and hierarchies that have become racialized in our American context. Paul repeatedly explains how Jesus' death was the means to reconcile people to God as well as to one another. In Christ, the apostle Paul claims in Ephesians 2:14-18, God has made a new humanity from those who had previously lived as enemies.

If the very center of Christian faith—the crucifixion of Jesus—proclaims reconciliation across cultural divisions, then so much of what we find in the New Testament flows naturally: Jesus prays for our unity (John 17:20-21); the Holy Spirit grants the gift of tongues at Pentecost that the gospel might be proclaimed to the multilingual nations (Acts 2:1-12); Philip is sent to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40); Peter is sent to eat with Cornelius, the Roman centurion (Acts 10); and, by the thirteenth chapter of Acts, we find the first multicultural church, pastored by diverse leaders who were reconciled by the gospel (Acts 13:1). These early disciples had been formed toward a vision of the kingdom of God that was experienced as a new family comprised of former cultural enemies.

Can the same be said of white Christianity? The answer, I'm afraid, is no. A 2013 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that the social networks of white Americans are 91 percent white and that “fully three-quarters (75 percent) of whites have entirely white social networks without any minority presence.”¹² Most white people,

in other words, have no people of color within the social networks that make up their lives. No other racial group exhibits this level of segregation; as the cultural majority, it's only white Americans who have the option to not interact cross-culturally on a regular basis.

But, we might protest, this segregation is true of all white Americans, not just Christians. That's true, but when we look within white Christianity for contemporary evidence of the early church's reconciliation, the picture is bleak. White evangelical Protestants support political movements to ban or severely restrict refugees at rates higher than almost every other demographic. More than any other religious group, white evangelicals believe that increasing cultural diversity in the United States is a negative development—this despite the fact that the majority of new immigrants are Christians. Consider also the segregation within white churches that we noted in the introduction.¹³

My point isn't to beat up on white Christianity. As noted earlier, the biases and assumptions that lead to the disheartening realities in the previous paragraph are in many ways simply the air we breathe, the world as we've been formed to imagine it. Even so, we must be honest about the problem many of us have sensed because it is deadly serious. For the most part, white Christianity is not making disciples who reflect and announce the division-healing kingdom of God, and the evidence is plain to see. And the reason for this failure of discipleship is profound if also relatively simple. White Christianity has been blind to the powerful racial discipleship that has formed the imaginations of white Christians. And it's to this insidious discipleship that we must now turn.



If the kingdom of God is one in which racial, ethnic, and cultural divides are reconciled by Jesus' atoning and victorious death and resurrection, the social imaginary of the United States is powerfully corrupted by what author and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson, calls "the narrative of racial difference." For Stevenson, whose work links chattel slavery, lynching, and contemporary mass incarceration, the critical component that our analysis of racial injustice

often overlooks is a set of assumptions that dehumanizes entire groups of people. How we imagine the world has been infected by this narrative of racial difference.

In an interview, Stevenson described how the narrative of racial difference came to dominate the American imagination.

You can't understand many of the most destructive issues or policies in our country without understanding our history of racial inequality. And I actually think it begins with our interaction with native people, because we took land, we killed people, we disrupted a culture. We were brutal. And we justified and rationalized that land grab, that genocide, by characterizing native people as different. It was the first way in which this narrative of racial difference was employed to justify behaviors that would otherwise be unjustifiable. When you are allowed to demonize another community and call them savages, and treat them brutally and cruelly, it changes your psyche. We abused and mistreated the communities and cultures that existed on this land before Europeans arrived, and then that narrative of racial difference was used to develop slavery. . . . I genuinely believe that, despite all of that victimization, the worst part of slavery was this narrative that we created about black people—this idea that black people aren't fully human, that they are three-fifths human, that they are not capable, that they are not evolved. That ideology, which set up white supremacy in America, was the most poisonous and destructive consequence of two centuries of slavery. And I do believe that we never addressed it.¹⁴

This narrative is not one that white Americans typically discuss or even acknowledge. In fact, most of us are happy to publicly affirm racial equality. Yet the lived realities of Americans of different races point to how this narrative is alive and well, even in an era in which almost everyone purports to believe in racial justice. We can think of the narrative of racial difference as invisibly polluted air or contaminated water; the fact that we don't recognize it doesn't dull its impact on our way of moving through the world.

In contrast to a vision of the kingdom of God, the narrative of racial difference shapes our imaginations toward racial segregation and injustice. To make matters worse, our habit-oriented desires are constantly being shaped by cultural practices that reinforce this warped vision of the world and our neighbors. In a society whose imagination has been infected by the narrative of racial difference, we should expect that our communal practices are forming racial habits that in turn deform our assumptions about racial justice and reconciliation.

As professor Eddie Glaude writes, our racial habits are “the ways we live the belief that white people are valued more than others. They are the things we do, without thinking, that sustain the value gap. They range from the snap judgments we make about black people that rely on stereotypes to the ways we think about race that we get from living within our respective communities.”¹⁵ They are so deeply embedded within American society that they have become instinctual, a product of our racially dysfunctional imaginations. Our racial habits are formed not through an understanding of complex and racially unjust practices, but by the observable outcomes produced by those practices.

Racial habits, Glaude continues, are learned “not by way of overt racism but through the details of daily life, like when we experience the differences in the quality of the schools we attend, the different nature of our interactions with the police, the different ways we navigate where we work, our different neighborhoods, and the daily barrage of signals and cues about race that all Americans get through television and news reports.”¹⁶ It is practices like these—the education system, law enforcement, employment, and housing, among others—that form the racial habits that in turn direct our desires away from the reconciled kingdom of God.

When it comes to racial injustice, most of us aren’t thinking about this sort of discipleship. Rather, white Christians tend to think individualistically about race, imagining both injustice and reconciliation as natural products of our relational choices. To better understand how our assumptions have been formed by racial habits that, in turn, have been shaped by practices infected by the narrative of racial difference, let’s consider briefly just one of these examples: where we live.

Maybe the choice of where to live doesn't seem like a racial practice, but it's that very hiddenness that often characterizes how social practices function. While some of our habits are practiced intentionally, just as many are being formed without our knowledge by societal practices that seem so normal, they're all but invisible. By not noticing how these practices are shaping us, we fail to account for the kinds of people they are forming us to be. So, how does where we live function in this desire-orienting way?

While we often think of where we live as a matter of personal preference, there is actually a massive amount of policy and legislation behind where we reside. As historian Richard Rothstein shows in *The Color of Law*, because racial discrimination was official federal policy through the middle of the twentieth century, black citizens were excluded from federally insured mortgages.¹⁷ Not only that, housing developers were only eligible for government insurance if they maintained a strict policy of banning African Americans from inhabiting the homes they built. The racial divide we see today between many affluent suburbs and nearby urban neighborhoods is not an accident of history nor the amalgamation of countless individual choices; it is *de jure* (according to law) segregation, constructed and sustained by federal and, in many cases, state and local government policies.

This means that the majority of us live where we do not simply as a matter of preference or convenience. How we decide where to live is shaped by what we might call a housing practice. This practice, like all our racial practices, is infected with the narrative of racial difference, which maps each American citizen onto a racial hierarchy. The impact of *de jure* segregation is so significant that race has become an accurate predictor of whether someone's neighborhood is impoverished or proximate to hazardous waste facilities. Also, because home equity is the major source of wealth in America, the descendants of black people who couldn't access federally backed mortgages generations ago now hold only a fraction of the wealth of the average white person.

Each of us exists within this swirl of racially determined decisions and outcomes when it comes to where we live. We're simply unaware of it most of the time. So this racial practice—the practice of choosing a home and neighborhood, as well as the myriad of daily habits that are

formed by it—slowly and subtly directs our desires and assumptions. We are being oriented not toward the kingdom of God but to a different, racially unjust and segregated one. The narrative of racial difference is strengthened in our imagination as we send our children off to local schools where “good” means white and “struggling,” “underperforming,” or some other euphemism means that the children come from the black or brown parts of town.

I still remember a phone call I received ten years ago. A white friend from the suburb where my wife and I had previously lived wanted to visit us in our new, urban neighborhood. But because our apartment was in a majority-black region of the city, he wanted to make sure that he could drive home safely before it got dark. No matter that our neighborhood is one of the most policed in the city or that, as a white man, there is nowhere he could go in the city and not be relatively safe. His imagination, in large part formed by the mostly white suburb where he lived, shaped his understanding of reality. Like my wrong assumptions about who stomped through my wet cement, this friend was acting out an imagination that had been oriented through a set of racial practices. At least one of those practices had to do with where he lived.

We could also look at other examples of racial practices—the education system, law enforcement, and employment—and find similar desire-orienting dynamics at work. Racial discipleship is framed by the narrative of racial difference and formed by racial practices. As desiring beings, our imaginations and desires are constantly being oriented away from division-healing solidarity with the body of Christ and into the racial segregation that has always characterized this country and its churches. Because white Christianity has largely ignored this deforming cultural discipleship, we have been unable to resist it. Instead, we leave our people to its isolating and concealing power, content to explain away our racial, ethnic, and cultural isolation as anything other than complicity with a system so totally opposed to the kingdom of God.



It can be painful to acknowledge how inept white Christianity has been at confronting the destructive narrative of racial difference and

the racial practices that shape our habits. The churches and ministries of my own childhood and youth, full of men and women who loved Jesus and mentored me faithfully, fall squarely within this racially homogeneous version of Christianity. Part of me feels like I'm betraying those I love or exposing shameful family secrets. The pain that comes with assessing the failure to expose and resist racial discipleship can cause some of us to turn back or give up. But I have found that painful honesty leads to hope. This is because, despite the depth of our failure, habits can be reshaped, including the racial ones so deeply ingrained in us. And, as we'll explore in Part Two, ancient Christian practices, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can be reimagined to seriously reckon with the deceptive narrative of racial difference and its accompanying segregating practices.

My desires and assumptions had already been deeply and subtly formed before my imagination betrayed me over some wet cement that autumn afternoon a few years ago. But the fact that my bias against young African American men was revealed in that moment does not leave me forever abandoned to those deformed assumptions. As a disciple of Jesus, my hope is in the one who promised me a new heart and new desires and loves that orient me to the kingdom of God.

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